

information on these topics. Students of Native American history and culture will find engaging discussions about the role of sport in identity construction, expression of political sovereignty, and cultural and ethnic revitalization. Together the book and the ethnographic film *Global Lacrosse Village* provide a complex picture of the game's roles in Native American culture and identity construction, as well as a formation of global connections and networks and local practices.

Lucie Kýrová

doi: 10.14712/23363231.2017.19

Peter Pomerantsev: **Nothing is True and Everything is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia**. New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2014. 241 pages. ISBN 978-1-61039-455-0

Peter Pomerantsev's debut book teeters on the edge between a memoir and a chronicle in real time. It mostly revolves around the use and misuse of media and language in contemporary Russia, as well as the impact that has had on the Russian population and its mentality. For several years during the last decade, the Kiev-born British journalist worked as a producer for various Russian television companies, in particular TNT (or *Tvoye Novoye Televideniye* in Russian, one of the largest commercial TV channels in the country). In the process, Pomerantsev learned about the many oddities of the Russian political and social system and its postmodern nature. The author's personal experience serves as the foundation upon which his carefully presented views are based.

Though he was always a well-known journalist, correspondent and documentary producer, and the book reflects that career, in recent years Pomerantsev has come to the Western world's attention as a renowned expert on Russian propaganda. He fulfills an important role as a professional consultant to government agencies and policy think tanks, and publishes works on the topic for major international media. *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible* largely kickstarted his newfound reputation as an expert in the field. The book displays not so much his academic expertise as the extensive first-hand experience he obtained living and working in Russia.

Pomerantsev's ambition is to make his book a relevant piece of social science literature. However, analyzing it from a proper academic perspective is difficult, because he offers no clear underlying hypothesis, no citations to literature, or any of the other trappings of academic writing. Needless to say, confirmation of the validity of Pomerantsev's first-hand testimony (if that were possible at all) is beyond the scope of this review. For simplicity's sake, all of Pomerantsev's quotations and his accounts of various events will be considered at least accurate enough to be accepted as a paraphrase of reality. Apart from what seems to be the occasional slight embellishment, there is little that would warrant an extraordinary amount of skepticism or caution on the reader's part.

The book's primary objective is laying the groundwork for Pomerantsev's own concept of "postmodern dictatorship," i.e., a non-democratic regime that employs some

specifics of postmodern art and philosophy, such as distrust of ideologies, denial of objective truths and an omnipresent skepticism.<sup>1</sup> That much is quite apparent from the title alone. However, the book makes no statements of that goal, and proceeds straight to its meat instead.

*Nothing is True and Everything is Possible* is segmented into three more or less chronological “acts” in which the author focuses on different aspects of the Russian media matrix. Act I, “Reality Show Russia,” unassumingly, through the use of story-telling, introduces Pomerantsev’s concept of postmodern dictatorship, a term he uses no more than once throughout the entire book. Even then, the concept is introduced with the words “some sort of” in front of it (p. 42). Pomerantsev intentionally avoids a strict conceptualization that would require him to walk the path of complex definitions. He trades off rigorousness for better readability.

Act II, “Cracks in the Kremlin Matrix,” deals with some of those people who oppose the Putin regime. It includes a lengthy chapter about the 2006 arrest and imprisonment of Yana Yakovleva, then a successful Russian businesswoman (though not an oligarch), who was overnight accused of being a drug dealer. Act II continues with a story about those who attempt to protect the last few vestiges of historic Moscow, as the city eats itself a bit more from within every time a newly-favored oligarch wants to erect his personal monument in the Kremlin’s vicinity. The next-to-last chapter is dedicated to a human rights group that criticizes the inhumane treatment of army conscripts. Finally, Act II concludes with a piece about a whimsical self-made millionaire who is driven into emigration. This middle part of the book has a certain *belles-lettres* quality to it. The individual stories are only loosely connected to the premises of the previous act. However, they are fascinating and deserve to be properly examined in some more academic case studies.

The third and final act of the book takes a darker turn and delves into the psychological aspects of the Russian political and media elite’s manipulation of the people. Here, Pomerantsev does not shy away from exploring the infamous Rose of the World scandal, which was brought to light by the suicides of two fashion models. Both had participated in lectures sponsored by a Moscow-based cult, Rose of the World, which Pomerantsev, in his role as a journalist, had infiltrated. Based on his knowledge of the cult and their practices, he depicts the drug-like effect of the cult’s meetings, together with its harsh rules and the vulnerable psyches of its acolytes who grew up in an ideologically amorphous and manipulative Russia. At one point, Pomerantsev references Émile Durkheim, who attributed spikes in national suicide rates to, among other things, periods of transition and social change (p. 186). Pomerantsev’s literary skill is apparent, but he only loosely connects his story to the atmosphere of today’s Russia. The final chapters of the book are about the last days Pomerantsev spent in Moscow and his return to London. He reformulates his views and concludes that, at this point, Russians have all but lost whatever

---

<sup>1</sup> For his concept of postmodern dictatorship, see Peter Pomerantsev, *Russia: A Postmodern Dictatorship?* (London: Legatum Institute, 2013; Transition Lecture Series), 3–4, [http://www.relooney.com/NS4053/00\\_NS4053\\_179.pdf](http://www.relooney.com/NS4053/00_NS4053_179.pdf).

remains of their faith in ideologies, the most prominent of which would be communism and democracy. The result, he says, is the rise of a “changeling” regime. Pomerantsev’s is a bold and interesting conjecture – one that is worthy of further examination.

From whatever angle one views Pomerantsev’s work, one thing is undeniable – the uniqueness of his journey toward a deeper understanding of what makes the Russian propaganda machine tick and what it is capable of – something that became widely apparent after the sudden annexation of Crimea in 2014. While working as a producer of Russian television reality shows, Pomerantsev encountered all sorts of the archetypes that exist in post-Soviet Russian society. Be it a former gangster, a gold digger (essentially a modern-day upper-class courtesan) or a Night Wolves biker, the book gently highlights the one aspect they all have in common: they shape-shift according to their whim. The gangster becomes a film director, the gold digger recites Pushkin and the biker starts promoting the Orthodox church. Pomerantsev considers shape-shifting to be the underlying theme of contemporary Russia. In his words, “(t)o believe in something and stand by it in this world is derided, the ability to be a shape-shifter celebrated” (pp. 73–74). Nothing is accepted as settled, and the country’s very identity is malleable between the Kremlin’s hammer and its anvil. One can truly get rid of all opposition when adopting any ideology at all becomes possible. Pomerantsev states, “The Kremlin’s idea is to own all forms of political discourse, to not let any independent movements develop outside of its walls. Its Moscow can feel like an oligarchy in the morning and a democracy in the afternoon, a monarchy for dinner and a totalitarian state by bedtime” (p. 67). It is this observation that allows Pomerantsev to grasp the most astute tactics behind the success of the Putin regime. The other two acts at times exemplify and argue for the idea of shape-shifting, but hint at it covertly rather than spelling it out.

Pomerantsev’s book conspicuously features his productions for Russian television, now that he is unhindered and free from the burden of being a PR tool for the regime. Pomerantsev seems to be aware of one criticism that suggests itself: his own personal involvement in the enormous Russian propaganda machine, something that might undermine his credibility. He addresses this in Act III, “Forms of Delirium,” albeit very briefly, explaining that the regime seems to be requiring people to act decently in private, but dirty in public (p. 200):

It's almost as if you are encouraged to have one identity one moment and the opposite one the next. So you're always split into little bits and can never quite commit to changing things. [...] But there is a great comfort in these splits, too: you can leave all your guilt with your “public” self. That wasn't you stealing that budget/making that propaganda show/bending your knee to the President, just a role you were playing; you're a good person really. [...] You can see everything you do, all your sins. You just reorganize your emotional life so as not to care.

Although the author’s excuses sound sincere, whether to accept them as sufficient is a subjective matter up to the reader. Additionally, what motivates or allows people to become a willing part of the regime (beyond their need for self-preservation) is something that perhaps should have been explored more thoroughly.

In spite of being clearly non-academic, Pomerantsev's first full-length book has already caught the attention of both casual readers and researchers alike. The more Russian disinformation campaigns infect the West, the more relevant the book is for those who are concerned about and interested in that threat. It serves as a unique qualitative account by someone who has worked in the nether region where the cold cynicism of a postmodern dictatorship is transformed into a haze of surreal and confusing messages fed to the public. This is where the Putin regime's uniqueness lies. It is the reason why its propaganda is so effective, and it is the point at which the regime becomes truly "post-modern." Pomerantsev had a unique opportunity to observe the mechanisms by which Russia's everyday reality is being calculatingly scripted. He became a part of it.

*Nothing is True and Everything is Possible* has broken completely new ground. It should be considered essential reading for anyone, in or out of the academy, who is interested in the contemporary Russian PR machinery.

Martin Kincl

doi: 10.14712/23363231.2017.20